

BLACK FEMININE CHARACTERS IN NADINE GORDIMER NOVELS

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*Abstract: During the Apartheid period Nadine Gordimer did not consider women's situation in South Africa as being an issue that deserved special attention. Her characters are involved in a struggle for human rights and for racial identity. Thus, it is a challenge to place Gordimer's view on feminism in context because she does not believe that a separate treatment of black women would be necessary. Yet, she expresses her opinions on this topic in a series of interviews in 1990 and she revised them some years later, after the publication of *None to Accompany Me* in 1994. Both perspectives are important for understanding her post-Apartheid novels, as they represent the liberation from the burden of history that seemed to overwhelm the South African writer in the Apartheid period.*

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In some of her essays published before 1990, Gordimer underlines that black women and black men share the same problems and they need to solve them before regaining their female/male identity. In a conversation with Jan Askelund, Gordimer declares that

It doesn't seem irrelevant to me in other places in the world, but it does seem at the present time to be a kind of luxury in South Africa. Every black woman has more in common with a black man than she has with her white sisters. (Bazin 1990: 277)

She does not see women rights as a separate problem but "part of the whole question of human rights and disaffected groups in various societies" (1990:154).

Gordimer admits that the progress made by feminist organizations in the battle for women's rights is noticeable, especially because their rights have been recognized as full human rights and not as separate rights. Women and men together, regardless of colour or race, form the instrument for "dismantling traditional structures of power at all levels" because "feminism by itself cannot transcend the racial divisions in a racially separate culture" (Ettin 1993:18).

As far as gender struggles are concerned, Gordimer thinks that women should take a different position in the politics of transformation in South Africa. She has argued several times that the women's liberation movement is irrelevant in South Africa, where political freedom for black men and women must precede any improvements of the over-privileged position that white bourgeois women have. Her writing is not a manifesto for feminism understood as a sign of resistance. Nevertheless, she believes that women should be part of the resistance and contribute to the struggle for liberalism. Gordimer writes about discrimination based on race, rather than discrimination based on sex, because she feels that the former creates a bigger gap between black and white than gender bias would create between men and women. White women's situation is

rather similar to that of white men and not to black women's position and this opinion is expressed in the comments made by Gordimer on Olive Schreiner's writings. Schreiner is the author of *The Story of an African Farm* and the first fighter for women's rights in South Africa.

Feminism was [Schreiner's] strongest motivation. Yet the fact is that in South Africa, now as then, feminism is regarded by people whose thinking on race, class and colour Schreiner anticipated, as a question of no relevance to the actual problem of the country- which is to free the black majority from white minority rule... The women issue withers in comparison with the issue of the voteless, powerless state of South African blacks, irrespective of sex. It was bizarre then... as now... to regard a campaign for women's rights – black or white – as relevant to the South African situation. Schreiner seems not to have seen that her wronged sense of self, as a woman, that her liberation, was a secondary matter within her historical situation. (Gordimer 1987:225)

In her 1966 review of Simone de Beauvoir's *Force of Circumstances*, Gordimer notes that women have the right to be equal to men, but they also have the right to be different, as it is not justifiable to treat them as "men with frills on" (quoted in Suresh, 2005:176). She also adds that "feminism as such - whether in its negative or in its positive aspects – has become a bore" (661) and that women are to blame for the fact that they are treated differently as they share "with other oppressed peoples the development of a slave mentality". Women are the first "to turn their red finger nails on their sisters who not only walk out of the seraglio but, worse, refuse the status of 'honorary males'" (177).

It becomes evident that Gordimer's view is an oversimplification of the South African situation, and she revised her comments in the late 1990s. She declared in an interview that her views on feminism have changed because the political situation has changed. "I can't see any vestige now of that trivial feminism that I was talking about so disparaged. A tremendous division arose in the mid 70s between the concerns of white women and the concerns of black women" (Lazar 1997:156). She also stated that "women had moved along that far but couldn't see how there could be any common feminism unless white women had truly thrown in their lot with black women" (157).

Nevertheless, she treats women with much more complexity in her fiction. Her feminine characters are independent and establish their positions in the power structure. Gordimer's white South African women share responsibility with men for any manifestations of racism. The white woman is not innocent, if she did not take a stand against Apartheid. However, she is prevented by the social and political conditions of Apartheid from assuming responsibility. *None to Accompany Me* shows how a white woman and a black one have two different trajectories, helping each other in their careers and leaving their personal lives behind. Despite the fact that many critics berate her "for her non-feminist stance", Barbara Temple-Thurston (1999:62) remarks Gordimer's "implicit criticism of women's complicity" with blatant or covert racism or anti-feminist manifestations.

Asked about her opinion on gender politics, Gordimer replies that there are women in the new Parliament, both white and black, and she gives the example of the black woman who took the place of a white Afrikaner male. She also considers the presence of a South African Indian as a "true demonstration of non-racism", especially because "nobody says she isn't black enough" (Lazar 1997:157).

When Lazar points out that some critics considered that the novel *None to Accompany Me* is "sombre in mood" taken into consideration the triumphant political period, Gordimer answers that solemnity is necessary when "things open up" and good things happen again.

Solemnity is a result of “what one might call a sense of awe” that South Africans had after their feelings of exaltation (158). About her feminine characters in this novel, Gordimer declares that they do not belong “to any women’s movement”, because the woman is “a movement in herself” (159).

The events that took place during post-Apartheid years in South Africa contribute to the modification of Gordimer’s earlier view that only after South Africans have defeated racism, may they become preoccupied with feminist issues. The starting point for this shift is her conviction that the greatest change comes from others. Her novels and short stories are concerned with different types of “-isms”, as they are interrelated, and she admits that there should be a common fight against all manifestations of discrimination based on race, skin-colour, gender, class, religion etc.:

We have lived 5 years of freedom. Whatever the frustrations as well as triumphs we’ve tackled, it is an achievement placed toweringly beside the years of Apartheid racism and before them the years of colonial racism – 5 years against 3 centuries. [...] The projection is of the priorities of their lives, along with the old colonial conditioning that these belong with whiteness and are incontrovertibly, always, forever, threatened by the Otherness – blackness. (Gordimer 1999:40)

Many of Gordimer’s novels have as main protagonists female characters whose development make some critics state that feminists should recommend the South African writer, especially since she insists “not on women’s passivity, but on their responsibilities” (Temple Thurston 1999:115).

Nadine Gordimer has been criticized for rendering black women silent and invisible while revitalizing and liberating exclusively white women through their attachments to African men. It has also been argued that the way she presents the issues of liberation may only be explored between white women and black men, because black women are servants, “bearers of food”, primitive and simple caretakers. However, her post-Apartheid novels and short stories come as evidence in proving the opposite. The short stories repeat some of the instances captured by her Apartheid writings, and the attempt to divide her work according to her views on the Black women present in her short stories, in her novels, but also in her essays is not an easy task.

In *None to Accompany Me*, Nadine Gordimer presents a different perspective on black female characters. The focus of the novel is on the empowerment of black and white women in the context of transition within the new multiracial South Africa. The changes in political power are used to provide women with a more important role in the first democratically elected South African government.

Sibongile Maqoma is the most important black female character of the novel and she has returned from political exile together with her husband, Didymus Maqoma, and their daughter, Mpho. Both Sibongile and Dydimus experience the new political climate and they are willing to join the party that will govern the country and, at the same time, be part of the preparation process for elections. Home politics has a new significance for Sibongile, in fact it has replaced the meaning of her old home: “Home for her was the politics of home” (Gordimer 1995:78). She puts aside the traditional duties of a woman and begins to struggle for the South African society, as a whole, not only for black South African women. We can see the transformation of a nation in the redefinitions of roles that Sibongile’s character displays and the strenuous efforts that she makes.

Black women are offered political roles and their struggle for the progress of an emergent nation has both positive and negative implications. Sibongile's relationship with her husband, Didymus, is significantly affected due to her new duties that make her act according to the possibilities of self-fulfillment. She needs to redefine and reorganize her relationship with her husband and her daughter, on their return from exile, in order to find her place in the new South Africa. The Maqomas are forced to create a new home for themselves, as their old home was destroyed by the Apartheid regime, and their exile prevented them from settling down. Sibongile and her daughter, Mpho, prove to be more flexible than Didymus. The two females are capable to reinvent their identities, so that they escape their memories of exile and adjust themselves to home politics.

After her return from exile, Sibongile plays a more overt political role than her husband does, as she is the deputy director of the Movement's regional redeployment program for returnees. Eventually, she is elected member of the central executive of the post-Apartheid movement, whereas Didymus, an old fighter in the liberation movement is constrained to retire and become an external observer of the changes to which his wife has an important contribution. The South African political circumstances dictate a reorganisation of power between men and women. Thus, the relationship between Sibongile and Didymus is bound to be influenced by the political setting: she is included in the productive political action and she displays new attitudes, whereas Didymus is trapped in his old self as an old fighter, unable to transcend the past. He is left out of the political scene; his place is at home, writing about South African history of exile and undertaking the former duties of his wife. Both Sibongile and Vera abandon themselves to their work in one of the committees helping to produce a new constitution: "a structure of laws to contain their ideal existence" (Gordimer 1995:315).

As Gordimer has shown the most passionate interest in the politics of her country, most of her post-Apartheid novels (*None to Accompany Me*, *The House Gun* and *The Pick Up*) are concerned with the new South African constitution, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and immigration laws that, in fact, form the core of post-Apartheid South African discourse. The history of South Africa places a resolute European man at its center while condemning to immobility and silence the 'natives' and 'women' who are its objects, the Others. In this respect, *None to Accompany Me* raises the issue of the possibility of re-writing history by the previously excluded categories. Thus, the roles of Didymus and Sibongile Maqoma, returnee activists, are central and illustrative.

Commenting on the close and complex relationship between fiction and history in the South African context, Stephen Clingman remarks that the unmediated voices of real historical agents are often heard in South African fiction and that historians could indeed turn to literature for verifiable evidence of the past. Clingman concludes that "the real value of South African literature is that, in its nature as fiction, it gives us a specific kind of historical evidence, allowing a particular kind of history to be written" (Diala 2004). Isidore Diala (2004) considers that "some attention to the non-fictional discourse on the leadership of the ANC in the late 1990s will easily reveal the historical consciousness that nurtures Gordimer's fiction".

Women's groups, youth groups, trade union groups were busy gathering support for this or that candidate; the old guard welcomed the influx as affirming a new kind of mass base after so many years of clandestinity. (Gordimer 1995:93)

It is well-known that different stages in the history of the world require different types of people and one should admit, at a certain moment that they are no longer befitting the place as they did in the past. It is this reality that Gordimer underlines in *None to Accompany Me* when she gives a

quiet role to Didymus, the black exiled leader who watches the political and historical evolution without rising to the challenges that his wife accepts when they are involved in the election process.

For Gordimer, the only form of resistance that counts is obviously to take action and not to watch and judge. To take a stand, to be politically committed and actively establish a connection between black and white are the tasks of every white South African, especially for women, such as Vera Stark and Sibongile (Sally) Maqoma. Vera Stark is one of the most experienced white fighters against Apartheid that Gordimer has ever created. She works in the bureaucracy that is trying to determine and enforce new land rights and it is impossible to con her.

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